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United States  
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Food Safety  
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Service

Food Safety  
Education Staff

August 2000

# Making the Connection

## Activity Report of the USDA/FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline for 1999

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## ***Making the Connection: Activity Report of the USDA/FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline for 1999***

### ***About the Meat and Poultry Hotline***

The toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline is a service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in Washington, DC. The Hotline helps consumers prevent foodborne illness, specifically by answering their questions about the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and egg products. The Hotline also responds to other issues related to the mission of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is to ensure that the Nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged, as required by the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, and the Egg Products Inspection Act.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, in operation since 1985, has been an effective educational tool for several reasons. First, the Hotline gives consumers quick and easy access to USDA and an opportunity to ask questions or express opinions. (Callers may choose to listen to recorded messages, available 24 hours a day, or they may call during operating hours and speak with a food safety specialist.)

Because they deal one-on-one with callers, Hotline food safety specialists are able to assess the caller's knowledge of safe food handling and provide appropriate guidance. Talking consumers through a difficult or puzzling situation helps them choose the safest food-handling alternatives, thus reducing the risk of illness. Specialists also assist callers by clearing up misconceptions about food safety and food industry practices.

In an emergency situation—an outbreak of foodborne illness, a natural disaster, or a product recall—the Hotline provides vital information in a timely manner. For example, in the event of a recall, consumers can obtain detailed information that will help them identify the suspect product.

Its nationwide service area also means that the Meat and Poultry Hotline can help detect possible public health threats. Certainly the data gathered by the Hotline helps FSIS discern gaps in consumer knowledge. In essence, the Hotline callers serve as a focus group. Analysis of caller questions and concerns helps FSIS plan effective educational campaigns.

Finally, the Hotline is able to disseminate information widely through a variety of channels. Consumers are the primary users of the Meat and Poultry Hotline, but by no means the only ones. When writers, reporters, and educators obtain help and information from FSIS and the Hotline, that information is passed on to readers or clients who may number in the millions. Hotline callers also include government officials; people in the food industry and foodservice workers; students and teachers; other USDA employees, such as those in the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; consumer groups; and professionals in health, consumer affairs, and law.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is part of FSIS' Food Safety Education Staff within the Office of the FSIS Administrator.



## ***1999 Accomplishments***

As in years past, the Meat and Poultry Hotline's most visible accomplishment was in the area of customer service—direct responses to the thousands of callers concerned about all aspects of food safety. In many cases, callers asked basic questions about the safe handling, storage and preparation of meat and poultry products. However, the range of food safety concerns was very broad. Issues and events addressed by the Hotline's food safety specialists included foodborne illness outbreaks; pathogens like *Listeria monocytogenes*; recalls of meat and poultry products; egg safety; agricultural biotechnology; dioxin contamination in Europe; Year 2000 ("Y2K") food supply concerns; technologies such as food irradiation; safety of cookware in microwave ovens; and many others.

In addition to its consumer calls, the Hotline handled calls from the media and other "information multipliers" who further disseminated the information provided by the Hotline. To reach this group of constituents, the Hotline issued news feature stories, fact sheets, and video news releases. The Hotline added new publications to its "Food Safety Focus" and "Food Safety Feature" series, to provide writers and educators with background information as well as ready-to-use text. Twice, collections of new publications were mailed to 3,000 newspaper and magazine food and health editors, and also to some consumer affairs professionals. All publications developed by the Hotline were posted to FSIS' Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>, for wider distribution. Placement of features in newspapers through NAPS (North American Precip Syndicate) ensured that millions of readers had access to information about the Hotline and safe food handling practices. Finally, information developed by the Hotline was published in a variety of specialized publications. The *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* published an article based on a feature explaining why foodborne illness cases peak in the summer, which was jointly authored by the Hotline and FSIS' Epidemiology and Risk Assessment Division.

As noted, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is part of the Food Safety Education Staff (FSES). FSES is involved in a wide range of educational initiatives. These are some of FSES' major accomplishments in 1999.

*Campaign to Increase Use of Food Thermometers to Enhance Food Safety.* In 1999, FSES prepared to roll out a campaign to promote food thermometer use by directing focus group testing of slogans and a representative character; planning activities for the rollout; developing materials for a variety of media; and facilitating meetings and information exchange among the Food Temperature Indicators Association, an alliance of manufacturers. As a result, several large grocery store chains launched their own food thermometer promotions. FSIS officially launched its Thermy™ campaign May 25, 2000.

*National Food Safety Education Month* <sup>SM</sup> (NFSEM). Created by the International Food Safety Council, a coalition of restaurant and foodservice professionals certified in food safety, NFSEM is a major food safety education focus for government and consumer organizations, as well as industry. In observance of NFSEM in September 1999, a proclamation was signed by Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala, and Neal Lane, representing the President's Council on Food Safety, to recognize the "many educators and consumers who actively promote safe food products and the safe handling of



food.” USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety Catherine E. Woteki visited a Washington, DC, area elementary school and demonstrated the use of thermometers to check for safe internal temperatures. FSES, in cooperation with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), developed and distributed a planning guide for food safety educators, with activities keyed to the theme, “Cook It Safely.” The guide contains a variety of ideas and tools for organizing food safety education activities and events for various age groups.

*Partnership for Food Safety Education and Fight BAC!™ Campaign.* The Partnership for Food Safety Education, a public-private partnership, was created to reduce the incidence of foodborne illness by educating Americans about safe handling practices. The Partnership’s Fight BAC!™ campaign, which began in 1997, continues today. In 1999, all FSIS food safety education activities supported the Fight BAC!™ campaign and messages, but several areas received special emphasis. The Partnership developed and distributed a new curriculum for grades 4-6, “Your Game Plan for Food Safety.” FSIS provided support, review, and distribution for the new curriculum and its predecessor, the “Presenter’s Guide” for grades K-3. FSIS supported the distribution of 30,000 free copies of the BAC brochure through the Federal Consumer Information Center in Pueblo, Colorado, and coordinated use of the BAC costume at school events, public health fairs, and conventions. FSIS supported the development and distribution of the multimedia materials—“Seasonal Toolkits”—offered by the Partnership through the Fight BAC!™ Web site, <http://www.fightbac.org>.

To further the Partnership’s goals, the Director of FSIS’ Food Safety Education Staff was appointed for a 1-year period to the University of Maryland/Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN) to assist with the Fight BAC!™ campaign, serve as liaison between the Federal government and the Partnership, and represent the Government’s interest in program development.

*National Food Safety Information Network.* As part of the President’s National Food Safety Initiative, which directed agencies to establish a national clearinghouse (now called network), government food safety sites on the World Wide Web were consolidated to help Web users more easily find government information on food safety at <http://www.FoodSafety.gov>. In 1999, this Web site was expanded and enhanced, with additions including the President’s Council on Food Safety Web pages.

*Special Emphasis: Listeria monocytogenes.* According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 1,100 people in the United States report serious illness from listeriosis each year. Of those reporting, approximately 25 percent die as a result of the illness. Because some groups—pregnant women and newborns; older adults; and people with weakened immune systems caused by cancer treatments, AIDS, diabetes, kidney disease, etc.—are at risk for becoming seriously ill from eating foods that contain *Listeria monocytogenes*, FSES consumer education programs specifically target those groups.

New, up-to-date information about *Listeria* has been distributed in many forms: a brochure, *Listeriosis and Food Safety Tips*; a video news release; newspaper features; and radio interviews. (Single copies of the brochure in English or Spanish are available through the Federal Consumer Information Center in Pueblo, CO, and packages of 100 are for sale through the Government Printing Office.) The video news release was broadcast twice in response to foodborne illness



outbreaks. To reach those at risk, a letter from the USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety, Catherine E. Woteki, was sent along with a copy of the video news release to more than 50 groups that work with at-risk populations. Publications were distributed through USDA's Food and Nutrition Service at regional meetings with school nurses; videos were provided for Extension food safety leaders. Outreach to vulnerable populations, and those involved in patient care, is ongoing.

*Improving Customer Service.* In late 1999, the Hotline added a bilingual (English/Spanish) food safety specialist to the staff to enhance service to Spanish-speaking consumers. Also, as part of the Agency's overall preparations for the Year 2000 rollover, the Meat and Poultry Hotline developed and implemented a new, Windows-based, Y2K-compliant data entry application to facilitate call tracking and reporting.

### ***New and Noteworthy—Caller Concerns in 1999***

#### ***Listeria monocytogenes* and Product Recalls**

Voluntary recalls of meat and poultry products typically generate calls to the Hotline. Most often, callers are seeking to obtain package codes and other information to help them identify recalled products they may have purchased. In 1999, half the meat and poultry product recalls coordinated and monitored by FSIS involved products testing positive for *Listeria monocytogenes*. Therefore, recall questions were more likely to be coupled with *Listeria* questions than in years past. In addition, articles in popular magazines and news coverage of the widely-publicized Bil Mar Foods recall increased callers' interest in the recall process itself. The Hotline responded to this interest by developing a new consumer publication, *Food Recalls*, that uses a question-and-answer format to explain how a recall works. This publication is available on the FSIS Web site at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/OA/pubs/recallfocus.htm>.

#### **Year 2000 ("Y2K") Issues and the Food Supply**

A unique issue arose in 1999 related to the "millennium bug" expected to affect computer systems that had not been upgraded to correctly recognize and display dates after January 1, 2000. Consumer concern extended to the possible impact that computer system malfunctions would have on the food supply sector. Over the course of the year, a number of Hotline callers stated that Y2K fears were at the heart of their food storage and food preservation questions. Y2K questions, while not limited to meat and poultry products, pointed toward a number of basic concerns applicable to all foods—the types of containers appropriate for food storage; the shelf life of various non-perishable items; safeguarding refrigerated/frozen foods during a power failure; and the importance of using only tested and up-to-date recipes from a reliable source for home canning. Unlike other food safety educators including Cooperative Extension agents, the Hotline did not record a significant increase in the *number* of canning questions; however, the types of products Hotline callers wanted to can were often inappropriate and unsafe choices for this method of food preservation (e.g., shelled hard-cooked eggs).

FSES participated actively in the overall FSIS business continuity contingency planning for the Y2K rollover. From December 31-January 2, Hotline food safety specialists monitored a special voice mailbox where consumers could leave a message if they were experiencing a Y2K emergency. No calls were received. Members of the Hotline staff served on the USDA Y2K



Food Supply Working Group to exchange information about consumer concerns and to apprise Department officials of the types of questions answered by the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

### **Summer Food Safety—Appearance by Secretary Glickman on “CBS This Morning”**

The Meat and Poultry Hotline worked with the USDA Office of Communications on a media event for the Secretary of Agriculture, which had a 4<sup>th</sup> of July slant. Secretary Glickman’s demonstration of safe grilling techniques aired June 23 at 7:22 a.m. as a medical news segment. This immediately prompted several hundred calls to the Meat and Poultry Hotline, some of which were handled by the automated system and some of which were handled by Hotline specialists. Meat and Poultry Hotline food safety specialists identified more than 100 callers who stated explicitly that they had seen the Secretary on television. Approximately one-third of the inquiries from this group of callers pertained directly to the safe grilling techniques demonstrated—in particular, proper internal temperatures for various foods and proper use of a food thermometer. Other issues addressed by viewers included utensil safety, picnic lunches, and food storage. There was greater interest among this group of callers in thermometer use than among callers in general, perhaps because Secretary Glickman aptly demonstrated how quick and easy thermometers are to use and made the point that all barbecue chefs should be following his example.

### **Dioxin Incident in Europe**

On June 2, 1999, the U.S. received information from Belgium that dioxin-contaminated feed had been fed to poultry and hogs in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and Germany. FDA ordered all imports of eggs, products containing eggs, and game meats from Belgium, France and the Netherlands, and all animal products including animal-derived medicated and non-medicated feeds, feed ingredients, and pet foods from all European countries to be detained at U.S. ports of entry. On June 3, 1999, FSIS placed a hold on all pork and poultry shipments from the European Union (EU), pending the results of laboratory testing to verify the safety of these products. Through the summer months, the Meat and Poultry Hotline received several dozen calls from consumers concerned about the dioxin problem—specifically the safety of product already in commerce at the time the problem was discovered and the impact on travelers to Europe.

### **Cookware: Microwave-safe?**

The year’s questions about microwave cooking tended to focus not on the oven but on the types of cookware used when microwaving. Concern was sparked by television news broadcasts in several large markets, articles in newspapers, and stories in publications such as the *Tufts University Health & Nutrition Letter* (December 1998). At issue was whether plasticizers and other chemicals might migrate into foods if plastics are used repeatedly or inappropriately, e.g., single-use containers used multiple times for reheating; cold storage containers used for reheating.



## **Slow Cookers**

Newspaper articles helped renew caller interest in another labor-saving appliance, the slow cooker. In early 1999, the Hotline recorded more than 200 food safety inquiries related to slow cooker use. Specific areas of concern were the use of frozen versus thawed ingredients, and the differences between the appliance's high and low settings.

## **Thanksgiving Holiday Boosts Hotline Calls**

The November-December holiday season was once again the busiest time of the year for the Meat and Poultry Hotline. Some of the issues raised by consumers were: product appearance concerns, such as pink meat near the breastbone or red liquid in the cavity of the cooked turkey; brining and deep frying as preparation methods, and associated safety concerns; labeling of turkeys—specifically turkeys with added solutions versus those labeled “basted,” the limited availability of turkeys with no added ingredients, and the impact of these added ingredients on the “natural” designation. As always, the shelf life of fresh turkey was a major concern. Regarding brining and deep frying, calls to the Hotline in late 1999 indicated that these methods of preparing the Thanksgiving turkey are gaining in popularity.

The Hotline does receive a significant number of turkey calls at other times of the year. This reflects recent trends in per capita consumption of turkey. The National Turkey Federation reported that per capita consumption of turkey in the United States increased 218 percent from 1975 to 1998, to an average of 18.1 pounds. In 1970, 50 percent of all U.S. turkey consumption took place in the last three months of the year; by 1998, the last quarter accounted for only 33 percent of annual consumption.



## ***Facts and Figures***

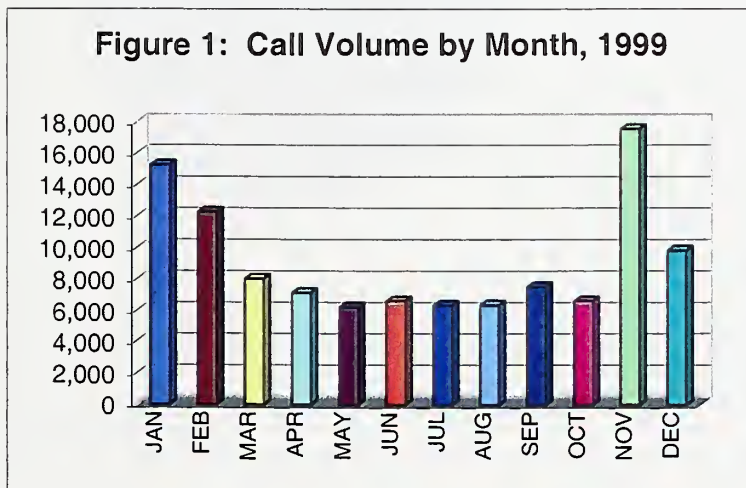
This section presents facts and figures about Meat and Poultry Hotline calls and inquiries received between January 1, 1999, and December 31, 1999.

### **Call Volume**

In 1999, the Meat and Poultry Hotline received a grand total of 109,804 calls, distributed by month as shown in figure 1. November is traditionally the busiest month, and 1999 was no exception. Sixteen percent of calls for the year were received in November. Interest in safe food handling intensifies as callers prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving.

January and February were atypically busy in 1999 due to a multi-state outbreak of listeriosis first reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in December 1998. On December 22, 1998 the manufacturer, Bil Mar Foods, voluntarily recalled specific production lots of hot dogs and deli meats that might be contaminated. This recall, and others that occurred in early 1999, increased the number of calls to the Hotline. January accounted for 14 percent of all calls, and February, 11 percent.

**Figure 1: Call Volume by Month, 1999**



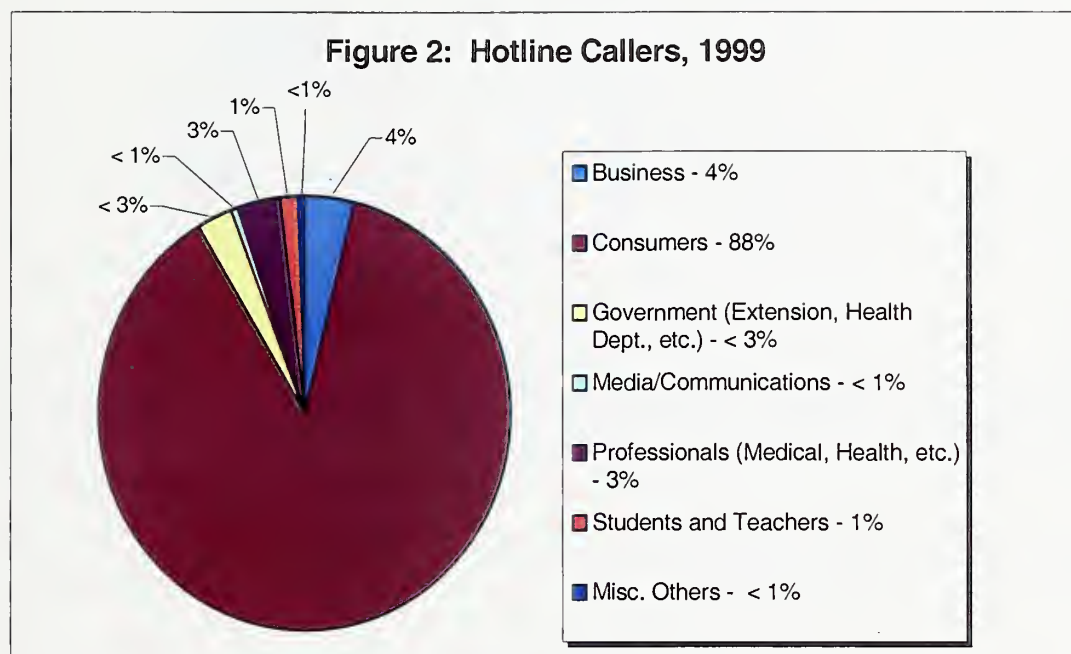
To handle incoming calls, the Meat and Poultry Hotline presently has eight inbound telephone lines servicing the toll-free 800 number. The Hotline also provides a local number for residents of the Washington, DC, metropolitan area and a TTY number for the deaf/hearing impaired.

The Hotline offers assistance from food safety specialists from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, but the system provides recorded food safety messages 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Therefore, the number of callers who spoke to a food safety specialist—and had their concerns documented—is less than the total number of incoming calls. The remaining statistics in this report are based on the records of 34,916 calls that comprise 36,271 inquiries. (One person's "call" may include several distinct "inquiries" on different topics.)



## Hotline Callers

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is primarily a consumer service, and in 1999, 88 percent of Hotline callers were calling as interested consumers. The remaining 12 percent identified themselves as part of a specialized audience, as shown in figure 2. (Percentages do not add up to exactly 100 percent due to rounding error.)



The Hotline's business and professional clients included educators and communicators; government officials; registered dietitians; home economists; Extension agents; health professionals; consumer affairs professionals; and representatives of FSIS' regulated entities. These "multipliers" of information—especially the media callers—allow the Hotline's recommendations to reach a vast number of consumers, not just those who call the Hotline themselves.

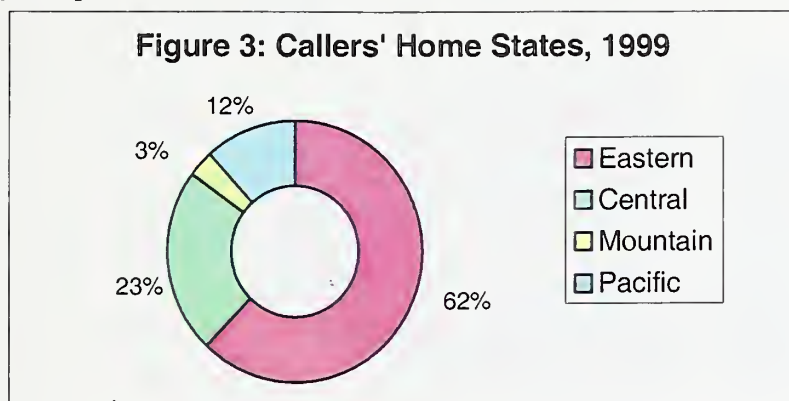
Figure 2 counts the 226 media/information multiplier calls that came to the Hotline and were handled by specialists. Additional media calls reached the Hotline manager through other channels, bringing the actual total to 364. These included calls from newspapers (129), magazines (116), radio and television stations (54), and various other publications including newsletters (65). The number of media calls coming to the Hotline is less than in prior years, in part because an Agency reorganization moved the primary responsibility for media calls to another Office of the Administrator staff, Congressional and Public Affairs.

## Callers' Home States

As a centralized service, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is able to compare calls received from different regions of the country. In 1999, as in prior years, the Hotline received calls from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and foreign countries. The distribution of the calls from the United States is shown in figure 3; the named regions are roughly equivalent to



time zones. The Eastern zone—largest in terms of population and number of states—produced 62 percent of the calls; the Central region, 23 percent; the Mountain region, 3 percent; and the Pacific region, 12 percent. This geographic distribution of calls is similar to the distribution in years past.



The top call-producing states, in descending order, were: New York, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, Illinois, Maryland, Virginia, and Massachusetts. Together these 12 states accounted for 70 percent of calls from the U.S. where the state or country was known (N=33,717).

The Hotline also received six calls from five foreign countries: Canada, England, Germany, Spain, and Belgium.

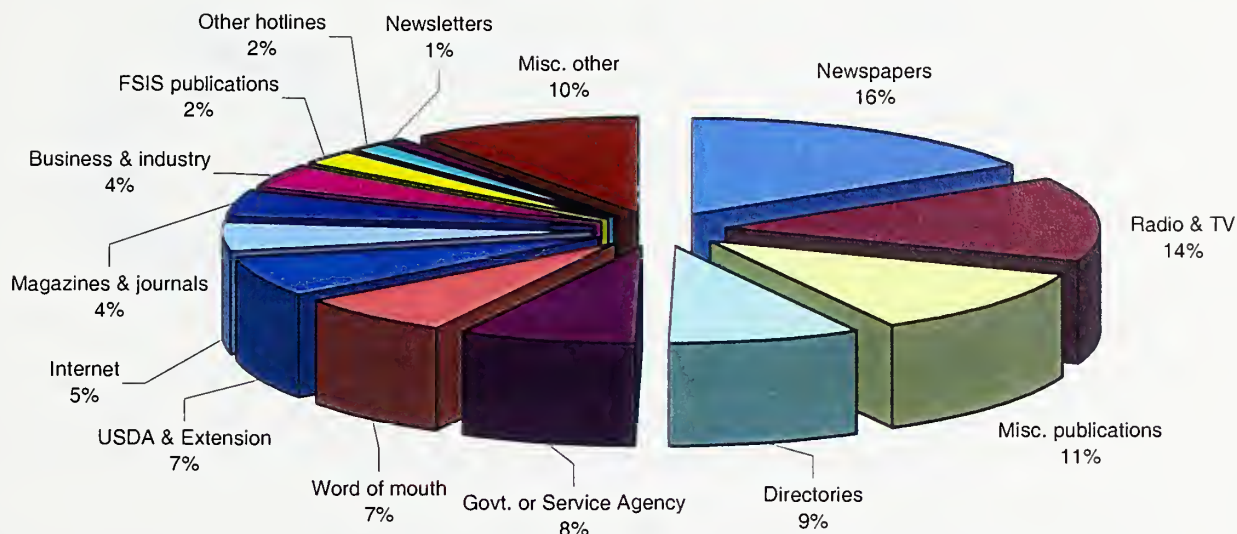
### How Callers Learned of the Hotline

Figure 4 illustrates the ways callers learned of the Meat and Poultry Hotline. This information was solicited mainly from first-time callers; approximately 30 percent of Hotline calls were from repeat callers. Print media were the most used sources, although an increasing variety of communications channels—including books and Web sites—led callers to the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

The types of sources mentioned most often were newspapers (16 percent); radio and television (14 percent); miscellaneous print and electronic media, including textbooks, cookbooks, and pamphlets (11 percent); and directories (9 percent). The most frequently mentioned media outlets included: major daily newspapers including *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Washington Post*, and the *Parade* Sunday supplement; the popular magazine *Family Circle*; and local television newscasts.



**Figure 4: Source of Hotline Number, 1999**



## Types of Inquiries

Ninety-eight percent of the inquiries handled by the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1999 were information requests. The remaining 2 percent were complaints.

The Hotline is one channel through which consumer complaints reach FSIS' Office of Public Health and Science, where complaint investigation is managed. In 1999, 582 inquiries were classified as complaints. Of these, 239 were referred for formal Agency investigation. The remaining 343 complaints were of a more general nature, or needed to be referred to the FDA or a local health department for action.

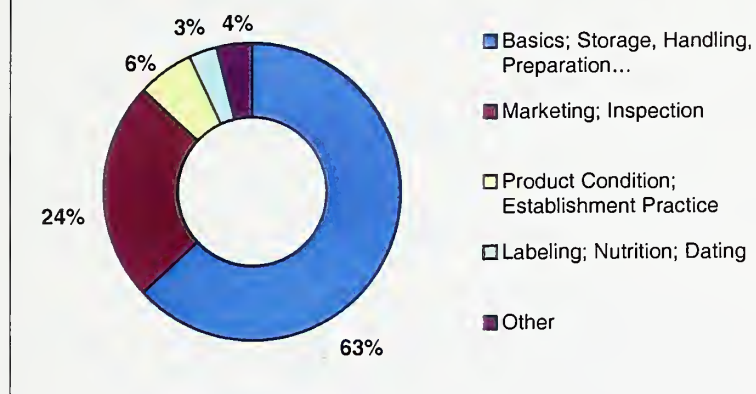
Reports of possible foreign objects in meat or poultry products were the most common type of formal FSIS complaint, followed by reports of alleged illness or injury. Similarly, informal complaints most often concerned alleged foreign objects or an alleged illness or injury, but also included a range of other topics, including conditions at a grocery store or foodservice establishment; product content or ingredients; and product appearance, taste, texture, or odor.

## Subject of Inquiry

As shown in figure 5, most Meat and Poultry Hotline inquiries pertain to safe food storage, handling, and preparation. This type of query, along with publication requests and general questions about foodborne illness, accounted for 63 percent of inquiries in 1999. This is consistent with data from previous years, which show that basic food safety questions usually account for approximately 70 percent of all inquiries.



**Figure 5: General Subjects of Inquiry, 1999**



Twenty-four percent of inquiries (up from 17 percent in 1998) dealt with food marketing and inspection issues. For example, callers asked about the actions of the regulatory agencies: meat, poultry, and egg product inspection; HACCP implementation; product recalls; product formulations; etc. Purchasing decisions also raised safety questions for consumers; they inquired

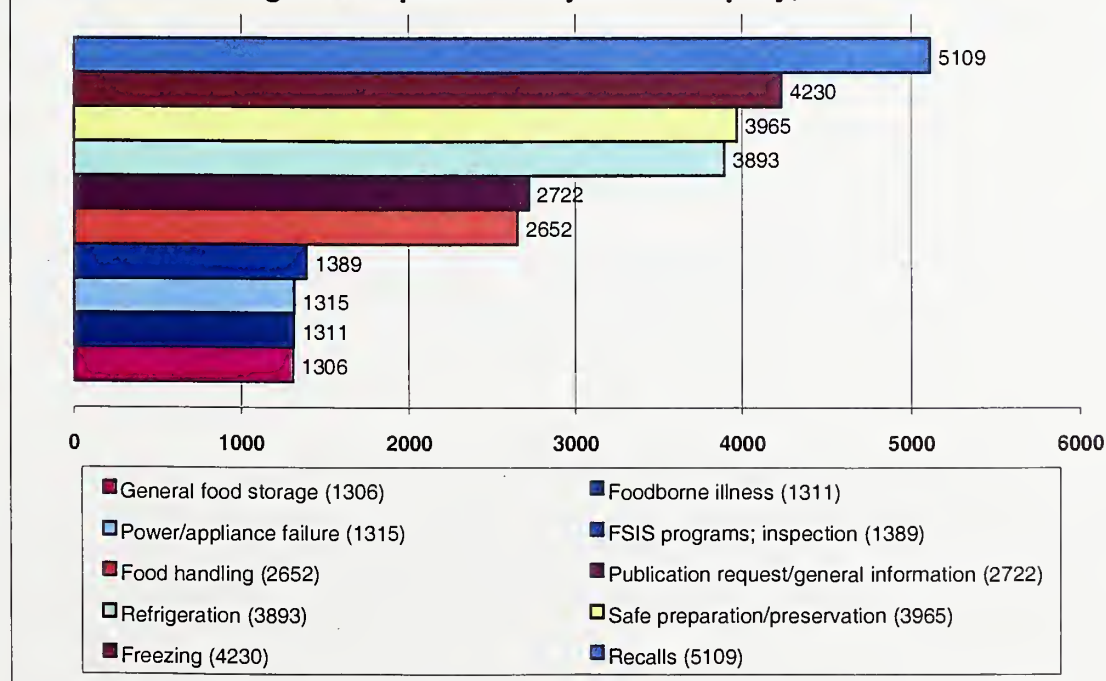
about food packaging, cooking equipment and housewares, agricultural chemical use, food additives, quality grading, animal husbandry practices, and food biotechnology.

Approximately 6 percent of inquiries dealt with products and practices that failed to meet the caller's expectations. Examples are products in "off" or suspect condition, practices in grocery stores, and practices in foodservice establishments.

Three percent of inquiries pertained to labeling (ingredient, nutrition, etc.), product dating, or basic nutrition. The remaining 4 percent of inquiries reflected other concerns and included referrals for questions outside the Hotline and FSIS mission area.

The year's top 10 subjects of inquiry are shown in more specific terms in figure 6, with the

**Figure 6: Specific Subjects of Inquiry, 1999**





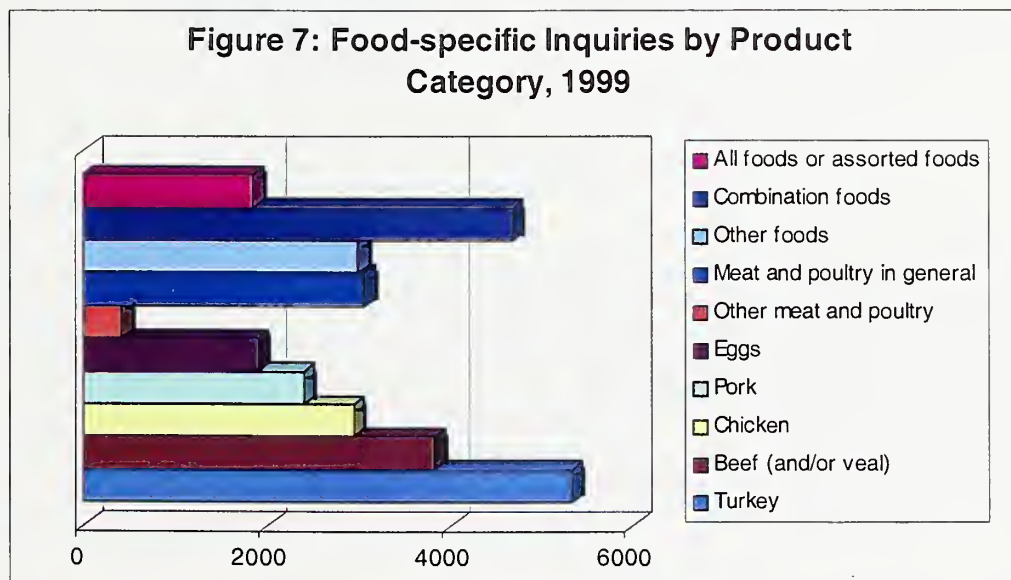
number of inquiries recorded under each subject.

### Inquiries by Food Product Category

Eighty-one percent of inquiries were associated with a specific food or class of product. Figure 7 depicts this group of inquiries (N=29,430).

Nineteen percent of the product-specific inquiries fell under one of the top five categories. These were: turkey, beef and/or veal, chicken, pork, or eggs/egg products.

Figure 7 shows that the Meat and Poultry Hotline receives and addresses questions about products other than meat, poultry, and egg products. The principles of safe handling are the same for all foods, and generally other foods are prepared alongside meat and poultry dishes. However, questions about other products are referred to the responsible regulatory agency when necessary. Most often, the responsible agency is the FDA or a local health department. (See "Call Management," below.)



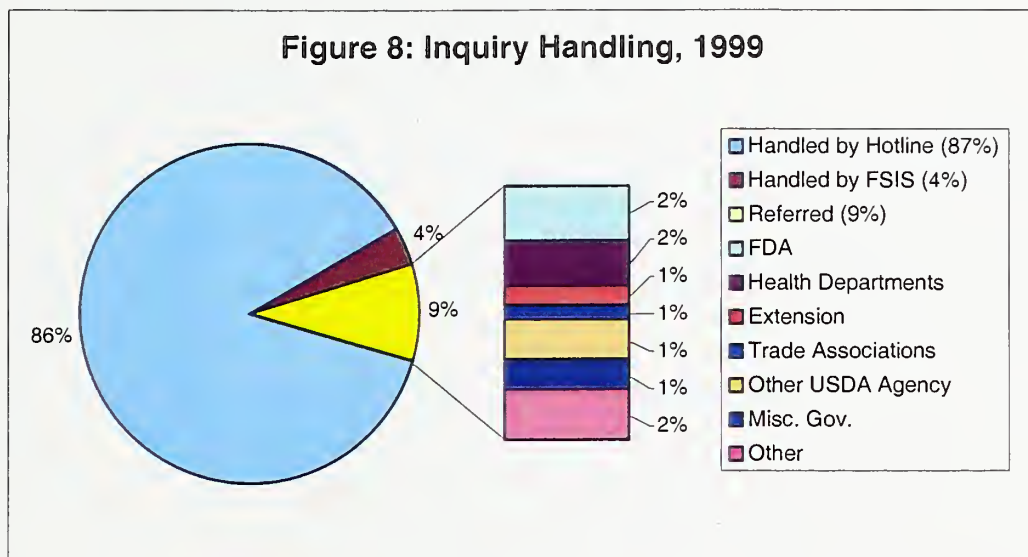
There are noticeable seasonal variations in Hotline inquiries. Turkey calls prevail in November and December; pork and egg questions are more frequent in the spring; chicken and beef questions dominate the summer grilling and picnic season.

### Call Management

The Hotline's food safety specialists maintain contact with experts in FSIS and many other agencies in order to provide the best, most current information to consumers. As a result, the Hotline staff resolved 87 percent of inquiries. Approximately 4 percent of inquiries were referred to another division of FSIS; the remaining 9 percent were referred to other agencies.



Most referrals were made to one of these five agencies: FDA, which regulates foods other than meat, poultry, and egg products; other USDA agencies; State or local health departments, responsible for inspecting grocery stores and foodservice establishments; the Cooperative Extension System; or industry trade associations. Figure 8 illustrates the disposition of inquiries.



### Day-to-Day Operation of the Hotline

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is one part of FSIS' overall food safety education program, and it is housed within the FSIS Food Safety Education Staff (FSES). In support of that program, Hotline specialists assumed diverse responsibilities in addition to answering calls. Many of the 25 publications developed or revised by the FSES in 1999 are based on calls to the Hotline. Publications were distributed in print, electronically, and as part of periodic mailings to newspaper food and health editors, magazine editors, and consumer affairs professionals. Key pieces of advice were the subjects of additional print and video news releases. All these publications are available on the FSIS Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>.

Hotline food safety specialists served as subject matter experts, responsible for keeping all staff informed about specific food safety issues. This entailed conducting literature searches, attending professional meetings and seminars, establishing alliances with experts across the country, and developing reference materials. Specialists maintained contact with other offices, agencies, and organizations that conduct food safety education. To reach audiences beyond the Hotline's callers, specialists gave speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

The personnel who staff the Meat and Poultry Hotline bring a variety of professional and educational experiences to their work. Specialists represent disciplines including medicine, food technology, and consumer and family sciences. Staff members have experience as home economics and nutrition teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, microwave cooking and appliance specialists, journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.



## For More Information

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline may be reached by calling:

- 1-800-535-4555 (voice),
- 202-720-3333 (Washington, DC, metropolitan area), or
- 1-800-256-7072 (TTY).

Callers may speak with a food safety specialist between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.

Information from an about the Hotline is available on the FSIS Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>. The Hotline's electronic mail address is *[mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov](mailto:mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov)*.



## **Meat and Poultry Hotline Staff**

Meat and Poultry Hotline specialists work under the direction of the Director and Deputy Director of the Food Safety Education Staff, and are supported by public affairs specialists, a management analyst, and administrative support personnel.

### ***Marva Adams***

Marva Adams, home economist, joined the Hotline staff in 1993. She has taught public school, worked as a consumer advisor for a major utility company in Washington, DC, and been a homemaker. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics education from the University of Tennessee.

### ***Sara Beck***

Sara Beck joined the Hotline staff in October 1990 and retired in December 1999. Before joining the Hotline, she had been a consultant in the Washington, DC, area in the fields of food, marketing, and communications. She received a bachelor of science degree in home economics from Catawba College in Salisbury, NC, and a master of science degree in home economics and communications from the University of Maryland. She has worked as a home economist with a North Carolina utility company, nutrition advisor to the executive chef of the Pentagon cafeterias, and a home economist/consumer specialist conducting a nationwide consumer information program for the inspection and grading services of USDA.

### ***Katherine H. Bernard***

Kathy Bernard joined the Hotline staff in April 1992. Her previous work experience includes 8 years with the National Food Processor's Association (NFPA), where she examined exhibits involved in consumer claims. This work included performing bacteriological examinations of food products, and evaluating food product container integrity. Ms. Bernard received a bachelor of science degree in biology from The American University in Washington, DC, and a master of science degree in food science from the University of Maryland in College Park, MD. She is a professional member of the Institute of Food Technologists.

### ***Bessie Jones Berry***

Bessie Jones Berry has been with the Meat and Poultry Hotline since 1986. She is the manager of the Hotline with responsibilities for the duties of one public affairs specialist and nine full-time and part-time home economists, dietitians, and food technologists who answer Hotline phones. She serves as media spokesperson for the Meat and Poultry Hotline and is featured on radio and television, and is frequently quoted in newspaper and magazine articles. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, and a master of science degree in consumer affairs from Howard University in Washington, DC, which included an internship in the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. She has taught foods and nutrition courses in the public schools.



***Olga Catter***

Olga Catter joined the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1999 as a bilingual (English/Spanish) technical information specialist. Dr. Catter studied medicine at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Perú. She did her residency training in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and in Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at the University of Maryland Hospital in Baltimore. Later she completed a year of Transitional Internship at Harbor Hospital Center in South Baltimore. Dr. Catter has been a substitute teacher for the public schools in Harford and Baltimore counties in Maryland, working in areas including special education, early childhood, and child care. Her experience also includes work in the airline and foodservice/hospitality industries as well as contract research for the Health Care Financing Administration.

***Gertie Loretta Hurley***

Gertie Loretta Hurley, home economist, rejoined the Hotline staff in 1999 after a 10-year absence. In the interim, she worked as a marketing specialist for the U.S. Department of Commerce and the National Archives, initiating campaigns to disseminate technical information to the public. Ms. Hurley has also held positions as an extension agent for the University of Maryland, a consumer affairs intern for a major food chain, and director of a Medicare certified home health care service and training program. Ms. Hurley holds a bachelor of science degree in community service education with an emphasis on nutrition from Howard University in Washington, DC, and masters of business administration in Health Care Administration from Loyola College in Baltimore, MD.

***Marilyn Johnston***

Marilyn Johnston has been with the Hotline since May 1987. Her background includes teaching home economics and serving as home service advisor to two major electric utilities in Indiana. She is an expert in microwave cooking, having worked for 12 years for a major microwave company. She received her bachelor of science degree from Purdue University, with a major in foods and business home economics. She is an active member of Electrical Women's Roundtable.

***Sandy King***

Sandy King graduated from the University of Maryland with a bachelor of science degree in home economics. She then worked at a Washington, DC, utility company as a home economist. After leaving the electric company, Ms. King taught microwave cooking for Amana, General Electric, Thermador, and Jennair. Ms. King has also been a manufacturer's representative for a number of cookware lines, demonstrating products at conventions, dealer shows, and stores. She was employed for 2 years by a kitchen design firm and has also worked coordinating conventions and programs in the Washington, DC area. Ms. King joined the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1993.

***Robyn Sadagursky, R.D.***

Robyn Sadagursky received a bachelor of arts degree from Brooklyn College and a master of arts degree in management and supervision from Central Michigan University. She is a registered dietitian whose experience includes consulting in a hospital and numerous long-term care facilities. In addition, she has been employed as a renal dietitian and a food service director. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association.



### ***Diane VanLonkhuyzen***

Diane VanLonkhuyzen, home economist, has a varied background in the field that includes a position as consumer advisor to a major utility company in the Washington, DC, area. For 9 years she ran a test kitchen, developing recipes for the company's cookbook and conducting cooking and energy conservation demonstrations in the community. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen has also served as consultant to numerous appliance manufacturers. She has been with the Hotline since September 1986, and has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen coordinates a variety of special projects for the Hotline.

### ***Mary Wenberg, R.D.***

Mary Wenberg received a bachelor of science degree in foods and nutrition from Ohio University. She completed a dietetic internship and earned a master of science degree from Ohio State University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes hospitals, university teaching, and school foodservice. Ms. Wenberg was professionally employed in Ohio, West Virginia, Minnesota, and Texas before moving to the Washington, DC, area. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association. Ms. Wenberg has been on the Hotline staff since 1989.

### ***CiCi Williamson***

Home economist CiCi Williamson brings expertise in the field of microwave cooking to the Hotline. In addition to answering consumer calls, she is a syndicated newspaper columnist, author of five cookbooks, and a book editor. Ms. Williamson has written almost 2,000 food articles that have appeared in professional journals, women's magazines, and hundreds of newspapers. She has taught microwave seminars for 18 years and is a speaker at major food conferences. Ms. Williamson is past president of the National Capital Area Home Economists in Business, the International Microwave Power Institute's Consumer Appliance Section, and Les Dames d'Escoffier. She has also served as a board member of the Association of Food Journalists. Her bachelor of science degree in home economics education is from the University of Maryland. Ms. Williamson has been a technical information specialist at the Meat and Poultry Hotline for more than 10 years.



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